

Ginger M. Eikmeier

D'oh! Using *The Simpsons* to Improve Student Response to Literature

Students in Ginger M. Eikmeier's high school classes link themes and terms from their readings to episodes of *The Simpsons*. Because students are already familiar with *The Simpsons*, Eikmeier believes that using the show supports students' comprehension and retention by activating prior knowledge. Additionally, it shows students that she cares about their interests when designing the curriculum.

Among the many catchphrases from the popular television show *The Simpsons* is Helen Lovejoy's frantic line, "Think of the children! Oh, won't somebody please think of the children!" Although said satirically, this line encapsulates what we teachers are supposed to do: think of students' needs when we design instruction. One of these needs, as recognized by NCTE in the 2006 *NCTE Principles of Adolescent Literacy Reform: A Policy Research Brief*, is for continued literacy development during adolescence. This need is often overlooked and, as a result, more and more middle school and high school students are unable to comprehend complex texts (2). One strategy that I have found effective for helping students further their reading comprehension skills is using popular media. For example, *The Simpsons* provides a bridge to connect students' reading to their everyday lives.

Activating Prior Knowledge

Educational researchers have long recognized the importance of activating prior knowledge as a part of the reading process. This is based primarily on schema theory, the idea that a reader's prior knowledge of the world forms "much of the basis for comprehending, learning, and remembering the ideas in stories and texts" (Anderson 594). As Jean Kueker asserts, a student's prior knowledge or schema "provides the pathway to understanding new ideas" (3). This schema provides an existing

slot into which the student can plug the new information being read. When this happens, information can be processed easily (Anderson 598). Without this pathway, however, a new slot has to be forged, and the content in the reading material is isolated and less likely to be understood or remembered. Activating prior knowledge, then, is a major factor of reading comprehension (Christen and Murphy). It is what allows students to create meaning, to connect what they are reading to what they already know. The reading material is thus transformed from words on a page to ideas that can apply to real life—making them easier to understand and remember.

Why *The Simpsons*?

While other television shows occasionally air episodes with ties to literature, *The Simpsons* seems to offer the most potential for linking literature and students' knowledge of the show. It is the longest-running prime-time cartoon of all time (McAllister), so even students who do not regularly watch the show are familiar with its main characters. Most students can vividly describe characters and plot lines (Hobbs 49). After all, these characters have permeated pop culture since the early 1990s, and with the recent release of a full-length movie, their pop culture status has been elevated. The students already have a slot for this show within their individual schemas. Additionally, since these characters do not age or evolve much, and since there is little,

if any, season-long plot development, any student can watch an individual episode without feeling lost. The students who rarely watch *The Simpsons* seem to get as much enjoyment from an episode as the students who are avid fans.

Introducing William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*

Before watching *The Simpsons*, I have students brainstorm what would happen if their class were stranded on a deserted island without any adults. They discuss what types of rules, if any, would be

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needed and whether they would care more about their own survival or about the survival of the group. This discussion activates whatever prior knowledge the students have about survival, which is useful for viewing the "Das Bus" episode of *The Simpsons* and reading William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Since the

students have most likely not been stranded on an island before, however, their prior knowledge in this area is somewhat limited.

In "Das Bus," Bart and Lisa are on a field trip with their United Nations club. The bus crashes and the children end up on a deserted island. Bart has all sorts of ideas about the fun they will be able to have on the island, so he naturally becomes the leader. Lisa also takes on a leadership role in her insistence for rules, logic, and order. Unfortunately, they both become the targets of the other children who are upset about the results of a trial held for Milhouse, who was accused of eating all of the group's food. These children chase Bart, Lisa, and Milhouse in a hunt similar to Jack's hunt of Ralph at the end of *Lord of the Flies*. The hunt ends when the group stumbles on the *actual* eater of their food, a wild boar that they cooperatively roast in a feast. A voiceover announces that the children created a "society" and were eventually saved by Moe.

"Das Bus" clearly has ties to issues that will appear in *Lord of the Flies*. To help surface these ties, I ask students to compare and contrast Bart's and Lisa's attitudes toward survival on the island. They

then have to choose which person they would rather follow and why. Interestingly, despite the fact that he is more self-centered in his view of survival, the majority of the students usually side with Bart's attitude because he has more fun. Finally, I ask students about the end of the episode and whether they agree that the children created a society. If they agree, what qualities define that society?

This episode builds a bridge between the students' prior knowledge of survival and *The Simpsons* to some key issues that will serve as prior knowledge for the reading of *Lord of the Flies*. Just as Bart and Lisa have differing attitudes toward survival, Jack and Ralph also have differences. Although most students sided with Bart, few will side with Jack in his self-centeredness. While the cartoon episode has a nonsensical happy ending, the book explores the more real consequences of differences in leadership and the eventual decline of order, and this is where students can move into a deeper level of thinking and understanding. In *The Simpsons*, the self-centered view of survival does not truly harm anyone because the kids are easily rescued with a voiceover. In the book, however, the boys are only rescued after two of them have died. The situation is now taken to a more extreme level, and the students recognize that in the real world, selfishness has its consequences.

Reinforcing the Concept of Irony in "The Monkey's Paw"

Lord of the Flies is not the only text that can be connected to *The Simpsons*. Another episode I have used is "Treehouse of Horror II," which contains a section that connects to the short story "The Monkey's Paw" by W. W. Jacobs. Like the family in the story, Homer acquires a monkey's paw that allows his family to make wishes. Also like the family in the story, the wishes do not turn out as each Simpson intends. Since we focus on the concept of irony when reading this short story, the episode is great to watch when we are finished reading. The students are able to pick out numerous examples of irony in the brief clip.

The structure of this lesson is different from that used with *Lord of the Flies*, but it serves the same function. First I build prior knowledge with the students by defining *irony* and giving examples. Then we read "The Monkey's Paw," specifically looking for irony. Finally, we watch the episode of

The Simpsons, where students are able to practice what they have learned. They can make connections to the knowledge that was built before reading and to their knowledge of the show. This short story might then fit into two different slots in a student's schema—one for irony and one for *The Simpsons*—increasing the likelihood of comprehension and memory. I have found that on our final short-stories test, the students consistently remember the events of this story, even though this is one of the earliest stories we read. On the district assessment over the elements of fiction, the students also consistently demonstrate a firm grasp of the concept of irony.

I have also found the students to be more engaged in this lesson than with other short stories. When the first group of students comes into the classroom and sees “*The Simpsons*” written on the assignment board, I often hear responses such as, “We’re actually going to watch *The Simpsons* today?” When the second group of students comes into the classroom, they have already heard that we will be watching the show and are excited.

This is where it becomes clear that besides activating prior knowledge, there are other benefits to using *The Simpsons* with literature. If the students think that what they are reading relates to *The Simpsons*, a popular, funny, hip show, then they are more interested in the reading itself. The show, then, can increase student motivation. As Mitzi Witkin similarly discovered with her students, “literature gains stature if valued by the media” (32). Therefore, the show can also support the validity of reading such classic pieces of literature. I tell students that one reason it is important to read the literature we do is that it will help them understand what they read and watch outside of school. Literary themes and references are prominent in pop culture, and without the knowledge of the original pieces of literature, we cannot fully participate in this culture. In other words, understanding books such as *Lord of the Flies* and short stories like “The Monkey’s Paw” will help the students understand television shows such as *The Simpsons*. I am reminded of this when I think about the class discussion we have about

irony after watching “The Monkey’s Paw.” As the students and I list the different examples of irony in the episode, students laugh, even at examples no one laughed at during the actual episode, because they now understand the humor of the show—they understand that it relies on a contrast between what we expect and what really happens.

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Additional Connections

There are more episodes beyond these two that can be used with literature. After searching through episode guides for the first ten seasons (the only seasons currently available on DVD), I found the episodes in Figure 1 containing extended parodies of or references to literature. However, there are additional episodes that can be used in the classroom (likely including some from seasons eleven through nineteen). Most of the humor in *The Simpsons* relies on irony, parody, satire, and hyperbole, so almost any episode would be a useful tool for teaching these literary concepts. To find additional episodes, I would recommend searching online archives of the show. *The Simpsons Archive* Web site (<http://www.snpp.com>) and TV.com both contain detailed episode guides that list references and allusions in each episode.

Using one of these episodes takes little class time. Since most episodes are around twenty minutes, a lesson using *The Simpsons* could easily be completed in one fifty-minute class period—or less. While I use a whole class period for the *Lord of the Flies* episode, “The Monkey’s Paw” episode only uses about ten to fifteen minutes. Yet the benefits of

FIGURE 1. Connecting *The Simpsons* and Literature

“The Telltale Head” (Season 1)	“The Tell-tale Heart” by Edgar Allan Poe
“Treehouse of Horror” (Season 2)	“The Raven” by Edgar Allan Poe
“Lisa’s Rival” (Season 6)	“The Tell-tale Heart” by Edgar Allan Poe
“Treehouse of Horror V” (Season 6)	“A Sound of Thunder” by Ray Bradbury
“Treehouse of Horror VIII” (Season 9)	<i>The Crucible</i> by Arthur Miller
“Lisa the Simpson” (Season 9)	<i>Flowers for Algernon</i> by Daniel Keyes

using these episodes expand way beyond the little time it takes to incorporate them. Not only do they aid in reading comprehension, engagement, and information retention, but they are also another way to show students that we *do* think about their needs and interests when we design instruction—we *are* thinking about the children.

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Frances Broehl. "Spelling in Senior High Schools." *EJ* 37.4 (1948): 200–02.